

MRS. SELWYN'S EMERALD

Astro the Seer Takes Part in a Drawing Room Mystery

BY ALAN BRAGHAMPTON

Drawings by Karl Anderson

MONSIEUR ASTRO and Miss Wynne! As they were announced and made their way toward their hostess, the buzz of conversation in the reception room was for a moment hushed. Women watched through curious eyes the distinguished, picturesque figure of the Master of Mysteries, whispered to one another, and noted critically the face and costume of the beautiful girl who accompanied the lion of the evening. Men glanced with amused contempt at Astro's oriental face, and scrutinized Valeska Wynne more indulgently. The murmur arose again, and the temporary stillness that had followed the announcement of Astro's name gave way to motion and persiflage.

The room fairly scintillated with lights, reflected from the cut glass pendants of the electric chandeliers, smoldering in the dusky gold carvings, twinkling from the jewels on women's necks and breasts, gleaming from the polished oak parquet floor. The large double salon of the Selwyns was about half filled; there were not yet too many present to hide the elegance of the highly decorated Louis XIV. rooms which inclosed the brilliant company as in an ornate frame. The ceiling, frescoed in the panels with nymphs and cupids, seemed faintly to reflect the life below; the tall mirrors multiplied the complexity of mysterious distances. There was an odor of winter roses which mingled with the perfumes of dainty women. An orchestra sounded languorously from the balcony at the head of the wide staircase.

"I'm delighted!" Mrs. Selwyn exclaimed effusively, leaning gracefully forward with a swanlike movement. She was a deliciously, almost a foolishly, pretty creature, with her bright smile accented by a black beauty spot at the corner of her mouth, with her slender little fingers flashing with jewels, with her lovely neck and her fair hair. It was hard to believe her a matron.

Astro, in his masculine way as striking a figure as she, presented his assistant. Valeska seemed more human than either. There was little artifice in her appearance; her costume was girlishly simple. One was not tempted even for a moment to let his eyes wander from her earnest, pretty face.

"I'm so glad to see you, Miss Wynne!" Mrs. Selwyn scarcely gave her a glance and returned spiritedly to Astro. "My dear," she said archly, "I had no idea that I had captured such a lion. People are simply wild about you! Why, I've made a sensation already by merely inviting you, I assure you! Not that I didn't know you were famous and popular and all that, of course; but, dear me, it's a positive rage! You have no idea what stories I've been hearing about you! They say you can read one's thoughts and go through a stone wall, and eat fire, and conjure the dead—and dear knows what! I'm actually afraid of you!"

"And I of you also, madam,—in that gown."

She spread her hands demurely down her side and looked up at him from under her lashes. She wore a costume of silken mesh, sheer and delicate, over cloth of silver, touched Frenchily with black. The base of her corsage was caught by an immense square cut emerald, set in small blue diamonds. Mrs. Selwyn was evidently not beyond being pleased at Astro's compliment, but her look suggested an unsatisfied desire.

"They're expecting something wonderful," she hinted.

Astro frowned. "My dear lady—" he began.

She nodded and shook her fan lightly. "Oh yes, I know. I sha'n't ask you, of course. I promised. But at the same time if something—anything—should happen, you know, it would be perfectly lovely; and it would make the thing go, wouldn't it? Oh, and there's an Italian Countess here, whose hand I'm simply dying to have you read!"

Valeska, smiling amusedly at her hostess's prattle, was about to turn away, when Mrs. Selwyn caught her hand eagerly.

"It was so good of you to have come on so unconventional an invitation! We must make you at home. You shall have positively all the men you want; I have armies of 'em to-night. And perhaps," here Mrs. Selwyn became almost coquettish, "you may have more influence with Astro than poor I. Do talk to him! Countess Trixola will be so disappointed if you don't succeed!"

A fresh group of guests here interrupted her, and she turned to welcome them.

VALESKA took Astro's arm again, and he led her to a corner of the room where they could view the assembly.

"I see what's coming," he began hurriedly. "I'll

be at my wits' end to avoid doing parlor tricks to amuse this crowd, in spite of what Mrs. Selwyn promised. I won't have much time to attend to you, my dear. But really you did beautifully. Nobody would ever imagine that you were born in an East Side tenement. Why, I think you can tell the would-bes and the bounders as quickly as I can, already. It's all worth seeing, and I want you to use your eyes. Watch every little thing as if it was all of the utmost importance and you were to use every bit of information you acquired. But don't on any account lose sight of me, if you can help it, and watch for my signals. Be ready for anything. It's the accidents of life by which we profit, and there is no predicting accidents. Give me the 'up and down' sign if you discover anything particularly interesting. Well, I'll see that you are introduced. I'm going to be mobbed."

"Here's the Countess, I'll wager," Valeska said.

A tall, ashen haired, limp and insipid youth was

Astro smiled quizzically. "Surely not in public?" The pale youth burst into a guffaw.

The Countess shook her finger at him airily. "Why, my life is an open book!" she protested.

"Be careful that it's open at a blank page, then." The pale youth again bowed and was struck on the shoulder by the Countess's fan.

"Oh, I hope I'm naughty enough to be nice," she said demurely.

"Madam," said Astro, with a queer expression, "I doubt if you could be either naughtier or nicer."

"Well! what d'you think of that?" she cried. "Why, positively I don't know whether it's the nicest kind of compliment or the worst kind of insult!"

"I leave it to your conscience—and your vanity," said Astro calmly.

She laughed it off and turned to Valeska. "Does he say such enigmatical things to you too?" she asked.

"Oh, he doesn't dare," said Valeska. "He knows that I'd take them all as compliments."



"And I Am Afraid of You Also, Madam,—in That Gown."

bearing toward them, escorting a vivacious, green eyed brunette, with a narrow, alert face and eyes heavily shadowed. Nearer, those dark eyes seemed a bit hard and glassy; but they were quick. She was considerably made up; but her rouge had been applied cleverly.

Astro had time only to remark out of one corner of his mouth, "Look at her right hand!" and then the Countess was fairly bubbling over him.

Valeska gave the hand a glance. It hung, white gloved, lightly by her side, the first and second fingers tentatively outstretched, the third and fourth curled toward the palm, the thumb projecting.

"You are Astro the Palmist, aren't you?" the woman asked gaily, tipping her head to one side and peeping over her fan. "Mrs. Selwyn said I mustn't bother you; but I do hope something extraordinary is going to happen! We're expecting something quite miraculous, after all we've heard about your occult powers!"

"My dear Countess," said Astro a bit cynically, "even saints must have holidays. I'm afraid I am out of miracles to-night."

"But at least you can tell me something about myself before you go?" she insisted.

readings, the palmist offered polished and affable excuses. He seemed as much at home in this smart company as in his own picturesque studio. Women gathered about him, fascinated by his romantic personality, and rather pleasantly afraid of his powers as an occultist. Mrs. Selwyn persistently showed him off; but, anxious as she evidently was to make her reception a success, kept to the letter of her promise and did not ask him to perform any tricks for the company.

The salon filled. The talk became gayer. Astro had no time now to speak confidentially to Valeska; but from time to time he sent her a look, a motion of head or hand, which directed her attention to one or another of the party. The quick witted girl watched him everywhere he went, and followed his cues on the instant. Long practice had made it easy for her to communicate with him thus; but this was the first public test of her facility. She played their game with a new zest, her bright eyes and high color alone betraying her excitement.

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THE group were now joined by others eagerly pressing about them to listen to the dialogue. The fame of the Master of Mysteries had grown wonderfully with the reports of his recent exploits and his reputation as a palmist was almost eclipsed by his fame as a seer and solver of inexplicable problems. The distinction of his appearance and the charm of his manner gave him a personal influence as well, and on this first appearance in society in the rôle of guest he was, as Mrs. Selwyn had said an immense success.

Valeska's reception was as flattering. She had passed the ordeal of introduction cleverly. The men flocked to this pretty blond girl with the hazel eyes, as to a popular heiress. Unused as she had been to fashionable life, her native wit and confidence, combined with Astro's own support, carried her through with colors flying. The affair soon resolved itself into a rivalry among the women for Astro's whimsical notice, and among the men for Valeska's flashing sallies.

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shippers and captured Valeska for a few hasty words. "There's something in the air," he said under his breath. "Can't you feel it? I don't know just what it is; but there is something sinister impending. Don't laugh. This is not mere professional jargon. You know I'm sensitive to this sort of thing. I never felt it more strongly."

"I have felt so too; but I thought it was a mere fancy."

"Cultivate those fancies, my dear; they're the inchoate beginnings of intuitions. Nothing comes sporadically. There's a reason for every whim we have, and you must learn to trace it."

"I don't like that green-eyed woman. I wonder if she is really a Countess?"

He smiled in amiable derision. "Are you?"

Valeska's eyes dilated. "Who is she?"

"That I don't know. I've tried her with all sorts of traps; but she is too clever."

"Oh, she's bad, I know that; but she fascinates me."

"She came alone, in a hired cab, Mrs. Selwyn told me. She got acquainted through mutual friends in Florence. That's all I know, except—"

He had lowered his voice to a whisper, and was leaning toward Valeska to continue; when the woman in question appeared at the door of the dining room, cast a sharp look up the hall, and espied them.

"Aren't you coming in, monsieur?" She smiled bewitchingly.

"In a moment, Countess."

"I want to know if you're magician enough to tell me what Mrs. Selwyn's punch is made of. It's the most mysterious thing I ever saw."

"If it's as mysterious as you are, my dear Countess, I'll have to admit I can't fathom it."

She dropped a curtsy, tipping her head roughly to one side, and withdrew.

"Looking for some one," Valeska suggested laconically.

Astro nodded. "Oh—did you see that chap with a pompadour and a curled blond mustache?"

"Yes. One eye was bigger than the other—the right one."

"Watchmaker. Comes from screwing up his right eye in his lens and using it so much. Or possibly—by Jove! a diamond cutter! Queer, isn't it?"

"Decidedly. But they seem to be sure enough of their position here. They're as well received as the other guests."

"There's something awry. I wish I could get it. It's all there in my brain; but I haven't time to think it out, now and here. Never mind. Only wait, and be ready! Come, we'll go in. I'll talk to you later. Here's Mrs. Selwyn now."

THEIR hostess sailed past on a young man's arm, and, holding out a hand, carried Astro in with her to a seat at the end of the room. Valeska was promptly annexed by Selwyn, a short, puffy little man with muttonchop whiskers and a big stomach. He had the air of not being at all at home in his own house. Nobody could seem so harmless and timid as this chubby, round faced host. He might have been an awkward servant, in his endeavors to efface himself. At seeing Valeska left alone, he offered his arm in a sudden access of courage. She was not like the others, and apparently he was not afraid of her. "Infernal humbug, all this sort of thing!" he grumbled.

"Why, what do you mean?" she answered, a little surprised.

"Having this fool palm reader here, and all that. Bosh!"

Valeska could scarcely repress a titter. But Selwyn was evidently quite serious about it. Seeing that he had no idea who she was, she humored him.

"It is nonsense, of course," she said gravely; "but I think that Mr. Astro is quite modest about it, don't you?"

"Oh, he's all right,—he has to make a living, I suppose,—but the women make such fools of themselves about him. I might as well give a monkey dinner and be done with it!"

Muttering thus, in an inconsequent, petulant way, he led her into the dining room, where she was immediately surrounded by men who offered her chairs, plates, and refreshments. Selwyn, more than ever disgruntled, retired to the wall, against which he flattened himself, and gloomily regarded the crowd. Valeska, besieged as she was, threw him a smile and a remark occasionally, pitying his discomfort and his timidity.

Meanwhile, her eyes were busy in the room. Once she caught sight of the green-eyed Countess talking with the pompadoured man, and she noted a certain surreptitious haste in their encounter. It was furtive, suggestive, or did she merely fancy it? From them, her glance wandered to the group of which Astro, with Mrs. Selwyn, was the center. The Countess joined it, sparkling, vivid, keen. A heavy, soggy dowager in black silk, with an extraordinarily low cut dress, plump, round neck and innumerable curls in her gray hair, was absorbed in Astro's conversation.

A debutante, as fresh as a lily, ingenuous, eager, bright eyed with curiosity, leaned over his shoulder, holding out her hand for him to read. Valeska heard little gushes of laughter whenever he spoke. She had never before seen him in such a company, and it amazed her to see how he dominated it, how his magnetism radiated and drew one after another into his circle of influence.

SO it went on for half an hour, until the party began gradually to leave the room, drifting out in twos and threes, all more or less stimulated by the supper and the champagne to an increasing good fellowship. All, that is, excepting poor Selwyn, who seemed to shrink smaller and smaller. He hardly spoke to anybody, except to apologize to some woman for stepping on her train, or to call a waiter to pass cigars or wine. His round eyes winked continually, and his lips moved as if he was talking to himself. When Valeska looked at him with an arch smile, he beamed like a child upon her for an instant, and the next all the light went out of his face.

She met Astro in the hall, passed him, and caught a sign. It was the "up and down" signal this time, denoting whom she was to observe,—a glance up to the ceiling, and down to his feet. His hand touched his hair with a little flourish. The man with the pompadour! She had it as plain as words could tell it.

She drifted away and sought the man with the pompadour. He was nowhere to be seen. The party was now humming with talk and laughter, and the double salon was crowded. The orchestra



The Missing Emerald Fell to the Floor.

swept into a Hungarian rhapsody which seemed to waft a wave of abandon into the room. The men that followed her flirted persistently; it was all she could do now to parry their jests and at the same time keep track of what was going on about her. Astro was standing near the center of the room in a group of wonderfully dressed and wonderfully pretty women, each perfect, finished, poised, yet animated and merry. Their little aigrets nodded as they talked and laughed. Selwyn, his hands in his pockets, moodily effaced himself behind the piano in the corner. Every time he saw Valeska, he beamed.

As she stood near the great hall doors, new men were continually brought up to her to be introduced, each with a new compliment or a flippant remark or a joke, each showing a friendly rivalry with the others. Valeska enjoyed it all excitedly. She could recognize the nervous pitch in her voice, as she shot her frivolous retorts; but the newness of it all stimulated her. For the moment she lost sight of the pompadoured man. She was gazing across the room to where Mrs. Selwyn stood, when—

SUDDENLY the lights in the two chandeliers went out! The room for an instant seemed as black as night. Several women cried out in fright, and then

a light chorus of laughter rippled round the room hysterically. In the instantaneous cessation of talk, a shuffling of feet was for a moment all that was heard.

The picture in Valeska's view remained for a moment in her eyes as clear as a photograph against the darkness: Mrs. Selwyn, merry, jubilant, talking to a fat old man; behind her the dowager, the debutante, the pale youth, all talking together; and a little aloof, the Countess, with a strange expression, and her fan pressed to her lips, looking in Valeska's direction—as if she was giving a sign! Then the picture faded; a babble of voices arose. Then, mounting over them all, rising to a scream, Mrs. Selwyn's excited cry:

"Oh! Stop! Help! I'm robbed!"

Valeska at the same moment felt a man rush swiftly past her, and there was a sharp twitch at the side of her waist.

Then another voice came like a bark, swift, stern, mandatory, abrupt, angry. "Light up there immediately! The switch is at the side of the door. Don't anyone dare to move till we have a light!"

At last, after a frightened half-minute, full of whispers and shocked expletives, the lights sprang up again, and showed a room full of shocked, agonized faces. Everyone looked at his neighbor with startled eyes. A louder buzzing of talk arose, only to cease suddenly again as Selwyn, pushing his way into the middle of the room, took command of the situation, like a General.

"Nobody shall move a step here until we find out what's the matter! My wife has lost her brooch, the Selwyn emerald. You all know it. I insist that everyone keep his place until it is found!"

What had awakened in the little man? At the crisis he had changed from a bashful boy into a wilful, assertive man, dominating the room with his resolution. The talk swept excitedly about the place now; each questioned his neighbor, or stared spellbound. Meanwhile, Selwyn had walked to the folding doors and rolled them shut with a bang. Then, red faced, with a fierce scowl, he strode back to his wife:

"Now who was near you, Betty?"

"Oh, I don't remember exactly," she answered hysterically. "All I know is that when the lights went out some one came up to me and I felt a snatch at my corsage—see where the lace is torn! Somebody stole it. It's preposterous!"

"Search everybody!" somebody called out.

"No, no!" cried others.

"See if it hasn't dropped on the floor!"

FOR a moment everyone spoke at once, and the confusion was maddening. Then suddenly clapping his hands for silence, and speaking as sharply as an officer commanding his soldiers, Astro's voice rose over the tumult. He had sprung upon a chair, and his fine head appeared above the throng.

"Mr. Selwyn, let me find the brooch! There will be no trouble, no unpleasantness for anyone. Let everyone keep his place until I've finished, and I'll promise to discover the emerald."

A clapping of hands all over the room responded to his speech. Instantly the mood of the company relaxed from its nervous strain of uncomfortable embarrassment and suspicion to an amused interest.

But Selwyn shook his head savagely. "No indeed! None of your parlor tricks, thank you! I will send for the police immediately. Meanwhile, everyone in this room is my prisoner. Those who object must necessarily be regarded with suspicion."

"Oh, George!" Mrs. Selwyn pleaded, "do let Astro try it! I'm sure he'll be able to do it. He's so clever, and he has done such marvelous things!"

"Yes, yes! Let him try it!" came from everyone.

Selwyn hesitated, looking half-contemptuously at the palmist. "How do you propose to find it?" he asked finally.

Astro put his hand to his head and drew his brows together. "I already feel an influence disturbing this gathering," he said. "I shall be drawn inevitably toward the person who committed the theft, as if by a magnet. Or at least I shall be drawn to the emerald," he added.

"Bosh!" Selwyn exclaimed. "That's all poppycock! What I want is a good detective and a police officer or two to search every man and woman in the room."

At this there came an indignant chorus of protest; the guests stirred uneasily.

MR. SELWYN, do you believe in the X ray?" Astro asked.

The little man grunted. "Yes, I do; but this is no time for a lecture!"

"One moment, please, however! Nobody knows in just what part of the spectrum the X rays lie, except that they are beyond the ultraviolet. They are visible only with the fluoroscope. Nobody knows just where the so called actinic rays lie, either. They are invisible also; but they react upon a plate sensitized with nitrate of silver. Where are the X rays, which emanate from the human body? Nobody knows; but I tell you, Mr. Selwyn, that they are registered in the gray matter of my brain. I am sensitive to them, as no one else has been, consciously, for centuries. And it is that sensitiveness that I propose to utilize. No thought can exist without modifying the molecular structure of the brain cells in the thinker. That change acts upon the ether, and is transmitted in vibratory form. Is

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It not possible that those ether waves can react upon the molecules in my brain and set up a corresponding change to that made by the original thought? Mr. Selwyn, I'll prove it!"

Astro's voice had risen to a strident tone, compelling and massive. Everyone looked at him eagerly. There was a hush. Then a volley of exclamations broke out like a storm, and Selwyn's last objections were swept away.

At last the host, overborne, and himself piqued with curiosity, gave a gesture of acquiescence. Astro stepped down from his chair, with a fixed look in his eyes, and gazed eagerly to right and left. He paused one moment, standing with his hand to his forehead, his little finger pointed upward. Valeska saw and read the signal.

"Follow the person I point out!"

He then walked up to the dowager with whom he had been at supper time. "Will you kindly take off your left glove, Mrs. Postlethwaite," he asked.

"The idea!" she ejaculated. "Why, what do you mean? Do you dare insinuate that I took Mrs. Selwyn's brooch?"

Her eyes were as wide open as a doll's, and her finger was ludicrous to the company who watched her. For the first time since the lights went out, there was a hearty laugh all over the salon.

"Silence!" Astro commanded harshly. He turned to the gaping matron. "Madam, you must do what I ask, and do it quickly, so as not to delay the recovery! If you are innocent you have nothing to fear. If you hesitate, of course, be blamed for suspecting you."

She stared at him indignantly, muttering to herself; but tugged at her glove, nevertheless. He took her bared hand and inspected the palm. Then he took her right hand, gloved as it was, and inspected that.

He left her as suddenly as he had come, however, with no comment whatever, and darted to the young debutante who had also been of his group in the dining room.

"Quick, Miss Preston!" he said. "Take off your left hand glove!"

Miss Preston was young enough and thoughtless enough to take the situation lightly, and obeyed him with a smile. He gave her palm a glance, then turned her hand and looked at the back. Then he left her for the pale, wan youth.

His glove too came off his left hand, and his right gloved hand was examined. The man with the pompadour came next, and the same pantomime was enacted. Astro's eyes stayed for a second or two on the man's left coat sleeve; then he passed on.

So he went from one to another, now to a woman, now to a man, until he came to the Countess Trinxola. Her eyes had never left him; her hand remained on her breast, as if to hide the beating of her heart. Her eyes were hard and cold; but the pupils were dilated. Her upper lip quivered a little.

"Will you kindly remove your glove, Countess? No, your right, if you please. Yes, thank you. Now your left hand, just as it is. Thank you."

He turned swiftly to the next beside her; but before he had examined the hand he had bitten the knuckle of his forefinger, as if in abstraction.

This Valeska noticed, and from that moment regardless of what he was doing, she kept her eyes on the Countess. The woman had turned to a companion, and was evidently voicing some sarcastic comment on Astro's methods. As she spoke, she moved insensibly away, and backed toward another group, nearer the wall by the windows. The company had now begun to move a little, and her progress was so clever as to be unnoticeable to one who did not specially follow her movements. She passed a few feet nearer the window.

Astro went on steadily, from one person to another, examining palms. In another moment, however, he had stopped dramatically, put both his hands to his forehead, staggered, and dropped to the floor. A woman screamed. Two or three men ran up to support him in their arms. A physician elbowed his way through the crowd.

At that moment, while everyone was staring at the group that surrounded the Master of Mysteries, Valeska saw the Countess move quickly toward the window. There, for a moment, she stood facing the assembly, looking sharply about, her hands behind her back. An instant more, and she had left again and joined the man with the pompadour. She drew him aside and spoke to him. He nodded, looked behind him, and moved away.

Some one was calling for water. A man laid his hand to the door to open it, when Selwyn's voice barked out again. He assumed command again.

"No one leaves this room! This man is not seriously hurt; he hasn't even fainted. It's all a trick to cover his failure. We'll end this nonsense right now, and have in the police!"

Valeska hurried up to the group, pressed in between the bystanders, and knelt beside Astro. "Stand back, please," she exclaimed. "I know how to attend to him. He has gone into a psychic trance, that's all. The strain was too much for him. He'll be all right in a moment, and will go on with his search."

She took his hand, and, unseen by the company, pressed it four times. Astro's eyes opened. He sat up; rose to his feet slowly; trembled; looked about; took a step forward tentatively. Valeska still held his hand.

"Science, everybody!" she called out, and

held up her right hand with a warning gesture.

EVERY eye turned to the two, and every tongue was silent, as Astro moved, at first uncertainly, and then with increasing confidence, directly across the room. He stopped before a tall cloisonné vase standing in front of the window, looked at it for a moment stupidly, then lifted it and turned it upside down. Out dropped the Selwyn brooch.

A hurricane of applause burst from the company, hands clapped, and men cried "Bravo!" Mrs. Selwyn rushed forward.

Astro handed her the brooch. She gave one look at it, clasped it to her breast, and then took the palmist's hands with both hers.

"Wonderful!" she exclaimed. "It's perfectly marvelous!"

Then her eyes caught a whimsical look in his, saw his cryptic smile, and her face changed. First it grew suddenly blank, then a delighted expression flooded it.

"Why—why, it was a trick! wasn't it? How clever! Oh, it was worth the fright, really! It was the best thing I've ever seen done! I never suspected it for a minute! Oh, thank you so much! I knew you wouldn't be mean enough to refuse altogether. I knew you'd be nice and amuse us somehow. But my! You are a wizard! aren't you?"

Selwyn strode forward. "Do you mean to say you cooked this whole thing up, sir? Well, you certainly fooled me, by Jove! Ha, ha! You got us all going, didn't you? Think of that! But you pretty nearly caused a big scandal, I tell you!" He turned to a neighbor and began to talk vociferously about it.

The crowd swarmed about Astro now, each eager to congratulate and to praise. Everyone gesticulated, almost screamed at one another, laughing, asking questions without number. Dozens of people, their conventional reserve broken down by the strain of the last few minutes, shook Astro by the hand.

THE Countess came up also, to flatter him on his success.

"But you didn't tell me my character after all," she complained playfully.

The glance Astro gave her was cold and sharp. "Madam," he replied, "your character will hardly stand another such test. If you will call at my studio to-morrow, I shall give you some advice. When do you expect to return to Italy?"

She gave him a long stare, grew a little pale, but shrugged her shoulders. "Are you in a hurry for me to return, monsieur?"

"I predict a great misfortune for you, if you remain here for more than a week."

"Thank you very much for your advice, then. You are too kind. Yes, I think I shall be bored to death in this town. I shall go. Au revoir, monsieur! I should like to know you better. We would make fine playmates!"

She smiled, and, as if reluctantly, removed her eyes, and left him.

Mrs. Selwyn drew him aside with eager eyes. "Of course I know I'm a pig," she said; "but really, Astro, couldn't you get that diamond off the Countess' hand and hide it somewhere? It would be such fun, you know! Do be nice and do just one more! They'll talk about my reception forever, if you do!"

Astro laughed. "That's the one thing I'm afraid I can't do. You see, the Countess isn't quite so innocent as you are, Mrs. Selwyn."

IT was a pretty big chance you were taking, seems to me," said Valeska, as Astro drove her home. "Of course she grabbed the stone so tightly that it printed the marks of the facets on her white glove; that part of it was easy. But how could you be sure? You didn't look at half the people's hands."

"You noticed the way she held her fingers when I spoke to you, didn't you? I didn't have time, then, to explain. But I knew by that that she was or had been a pickpocket. The professional dipper works with his first two fingers, and almost always carries his hand with them extended, and the other two fingers curled up out of the way."

"But why did you look at her left glove, instead of the right, as you did all the others?"

"I had noticed at supper time that she was left handed. Where I took my long chance, my dear, was when I trusted to you to find out what she did with the brooch. I confess that when I dropped on the floor and waited for your signal, I was rather anxious. It was up to you, then, to make me or break me. But I was sure I could trust you, and you did beautifully."

Valeska herself had been more anxious during that few minutes than she confessed. There was, however, one more thing to be straightened out in her mind.

"What I don't understand is who put out the lights," she remarked. "I forgot to tell you that I was standing near the wall where the electric switch was, and immediately the lights went out some one brushed past me roughly, and something twitched at my waist. I wonder who it was?"

Astro cast a look down at her side and smiled. "Oh, that settles something that bothered me," he said musingly. "Clever little buckles on your corsage, my dear! I wondered how that pompadoured chap happened to have his left coat sleeve cut in such a queer way; but I was too busy to think it out. I wish now I had given both of them over to the police. I expect he's a diamond cutter, fast enough! Mrs. Selwyn is lucky that six or seven different persons won't be wearing pieces of her emerald next year."

The next Master of Mysteries story, "The Lorraine Elongement" will appear September 6.



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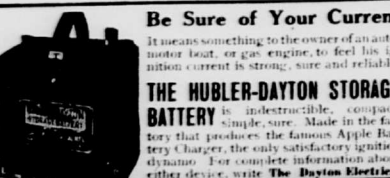
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